Liars and Cheats: Crossing the Lines of Childhood, Adulthood, and Morality in *Ender's Game*

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> The monitor lady smiled very nicely and tousled his hair and said, "Andrew, I suppose by now you're just absolutely sick of having that horrid monitor. Well, I have good news for you. That monitor is going to come out today. We're going to take it right out, and it won't hurt a bit."
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> Ender nodded. It was a lie, of course, that it wouldn't hurt a bit. But since adults always said it when it *was* going to hurt, he could count on that statement as an accurate prediction of the future. Sometimes lies were more dependable than the truth.
>
> ***Orson Scott Card***
> Ender's Game

SET IN A FUTURE WORLD in which the human race faces extinction at the hands of alien "buggers," Orson Scott Card's science fiction novel *Ender's Game* follows six-year-old Ender Wiggin as he leaves his home, trains as a soldier, and becomes the hero of mankind. It also traces the complicated systems of dependence and deception that surround him as he develops into the powerful tool the adults need him to be. One of the central projects of the novel, in fact, is to illuminate the manner in which Ender's childhood, and childhood in general, is constructed by the adults who seek to control children's attitudes and behaviours. In the process, the

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novel ostensibly insists upon the corrupt nature of adulthood, from the fib told by the nurse in the passage above to the great deception, revealed near the novel's conclusion, that Ender's final "game" has actually been a real battle in which the child soldier has inadvertently destroyed the alien race. Throughout *Ender's Game*, adults lie. They cheat. They change the rules in the middle of the game. Adults, in short, refuse to fight fair—and children know it.

Even as this emphasis on the apparently corrupt nature of adulthood would suggest a dependence on a traditional adult-child binary that highlights the innocent, moral nature of childhood, *Ender's Game* resists conventional expectations about the nature of the relationship between children and adults by insisting instead upon ambivalence and ambiguity. In other words, the relationship between childhood and adulthood comes to be understood as much more complicated and interdependent than a simple binary; instead, over the course of the novel, Card challenges, resists, or rejects outright many of the distinctions often drawn between these two states, particularly in regards to the figure of the moral child. Adults in *Ender's Game* may not fight fairly, but neither, in the end, do children. Far from simply being the good, innocent, justice-seeking opposites of deceptive adults, the young characters who populate Ender's world also demonstrate a capacity for cruelty, dishonesty, and injustice. In the process, Card's characters, regardless of age, draw attention to the ways in which the typical concept of morality itself depends on often arbitrary binaries of right and wrong that, when challenged, grow slippery. As both adults and children cross the lines between moral and immoral behaviour, then, the distinctions drawn between childhood and adulthood become increasingly unstable, forcing reconsiderations of both states and the relationships between them.

The passage above demonstrates the manner in which Card's interrogation of childhood as a constructed state intersects with his interests in moral ambiguities and deception. The nurse's lie that the medical procedure "won't hurt a bit" rests upon several implicit assumptions about childhood, ranging from the general assumption that Ender will be frightened to the more specific assumption that she can and should deceive him in order to alleviate his anxiety. This lie also depends upon a belief that, as a child, Ender knows and understands less than she does as an adult; in other words, her decision to lie is grounded in the belief that Ender will accept her words willingly. These assumptions and beliefs all stem from a more general construction of children as purer, more innocent, and less knowledgeable and experienced than adults. In drawing attention to the

nurse's deception, Card highlights concepts of innocence and inexperience that have been associated with childhood since the Romantic era. While the nurse's lie to Ender reflects a fairly typical construction of childhood, however, the novel undercuts the usefulness or accuracy of its underlying assumptions by insisting upon Ender's capacity to develop his own understanding of the nature of adulthood, a capacity that is generally denied or ignored in traditional representations of the adult-child binary. Thus, when Ender essentially decodes the nurse's statement based on his previous experiences that "adults always said it when it *was* going to hurt," he illustrates David Rudd's assertion that childhood is not exclusively a state construct*ed* by adults; it is simultaneously a socially construct*ive* state. (Ender also proves correct about the procedure itself—it is immensely painful and nearly kills him.)

The passage also provides insights into the ambiguous nature of deception, as the nurse's lie seemingly reflects good intentions; the possibility that bad actions can be undertaken for good reasons (and vice versa) becomes an important theme in the novel, particularly when the characters' actions have far-reaching consequences for humankind. Indeed, the nurse's lie illuminates the novel's particular treatment of morality in terms of the expectation of honesty in language and representation, as well as the politics and cultural norms of creating, bending, and breaking rules. As both adult and child characters continuously cross the ostensibly clear borders between wrong and right, nearly all of the major events and relationships in the novel are clouded with ambiguity, especially in terms of the deception that leads to Ender's destruction of the aliens. The collapsing of distinctions between children and adults in fact depends heavily upon the ambivalent treatment of deception throughout the novel: the lines between childhood and adulthood, Card suggests, are—like the lines between truth and lies, between moral high ground and low—at times arbitrary, blurry, or even nonexistent. Throughout the novel, Card's efforts to destabilize the adult/child dichotomy indicate the desire to find a more flexible and potentially fruitful view of both states. Ultimately, however, *Ender's Game*[1] also illustrates the ways in which such destabilization of accepted binaries need not be understood as an abandonment

1 Although I focus exclusively here on *Ender's Game*, it is important to note that Card further challenges and complicates these boundaries in *Ender's Shadow*. Published fifteen years after the original *Ender* novel, *Shadow* is essentially a retelling of the first text focalized through secondary character Bean. As Christine Doyle points out, this shift in focalization is accompanied by the revelation that Bean knew about the great deception, a point that is underlined by the fact

of boundaries; rather, Card argues, those boundaries should not remain unquestioned or unchallenged.

"Impossible to keep apart": Literary and Critical Contexts

Since its publication, *Ender's Game* has been the subject of a great deal of scholarly criticism in venues about both literature for adults and literature for children.[2] Because of a general recognition or assumption of Ender's status as child, however, most of the critical discussion of this novel takes for granted that his character—and thus the novel as a whole—enacts traditional assumptions of childhood. Christine Doyle, for example, notes that "Ender's capacity for pondering life, death, and the fate of the world is certainly one of the characteristics that most defines him, in Card's view; in fact, he exhibits this characteristic to such an extent … that the adults need to keep from [him] the information that they are actually, in their final battle, dealing with life and death" (308). While Doyle is certainly correct about Ender's existential ponderings, she focuses on this capacity as a character trait rather than as an indication of Card's larger interrogation of childhood. George Slusser, meanwhile, labels Ender a "forever child" whose hero's journey moves regressively toward childhood rather than adulthood; he argues that "However cynical and cruel the manipulation, the fact remains that Ender is a weapon here, a weapon created not by accelerating the normal path of formation, but by forcing the juvenile hero back to a state of childhood 'innocence'" (79). In his consideration of the novel, Eric S. Rabkin presents *Ender's Game* as a work of "disempowerment fantasies," asserting that adult readers seek science fiction works such as Card's novel in an attempt "to escape the public realm of adult interaction" and warning that such "childlike submergence risks authorizing a feeble wish for a miracle" (17). Notably, these discussions of Ender as child rely on general assumptions about childhood as a state that reflect long-held beliefs and well-established literary traditions. Although it is by no means the only construction of childhood, the concept of the child as morally pure has persisted for centuries; beginning with Romantic-Era writers and philosophers such as Rousseau and Blake and continuing through

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that readers approach this second novel with an awareness of how the story ends: "[S]o one of the earlier book's most compelling plot lines, and certainly its thematic core, is already exposed" (313).

2 Scholarly discussions of *Ender's Game* have approached the novel from a variety of angles, from war and military strategy (see Steffen Hantke, "Surgical Strikes and Prosthetic Warriors: The Soldier's Body in Contemporary Science Fiction") to sexuality (see James Campbell, "Kill the Bugger: *Ender's Game* and the Ques-

the so-called "Cult of the Child" in the Victorian Age, the figure of the romantic, moral, or "natural" child—a child who is innocent, pure of heart, and aligned with nature—persists in both literature and criticism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Although scholars such as Marah Gubar have demonstrated that the concept of Romantic childhood was neither so ubiquitous nor so consistent as originally thought, this treatment of childhood as morally purer than adulthood remains prevalent in much contemporary literature and culture for and about young people. This construction of childhood seemingly values its limits, in terms of the fact both that the child cannot threaten the adult through knowledge or experience and that the child's capacity for goodness limits, obscures, or makes impossible a capacity for corruption—even as the child progresses, apparently inevitably and through the at times ambivalent guidance of adults, toward adulthood.

The enduring (if evolving) figure of the romantic child, moreover, is largely a construction of literature, a fiction captured in and perpetuated by fictions. The fact that literature for children has generally been produced by adults further complicates and informs considerations of how the figure of the child has been shaped and employed, which has led to critical discussions such as Jacqueline Rose's famous argument that children's literature is impossible[3] and Perry Nodelman's more recent consideration of the role of adults as not only creators but readers of children's literature.[4] At the very least, as scholars such as Maria Nikolajeva have noted, adult authors of children's literature present young readers with specific constructions of childhood, many of which have been used to shape real children's behaviours and attitudes. As Nikolajeva argues, "If we refuse to admit that we use children's literature as a stick and a carrot we are surely lying. And if we simply disown all responsibility for the way children turn out, we are surely doing something worse" (131). Card's active interrogation of the adult/child binary, then, both intersects with ongoing critical discussions regarding this topic and potentially works to unsettle the assumptions about childhood that govern this conversation.

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tion of Heteronormativity") and child abuse (see Melissa Gross, "Prisoners of Childhood?: Child Abuse and Development of Heroes and Monsters in *Ender's Game*").

3 See Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, as well as the special issue of the *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 35.3 dedicated to reconsiderations of Rose's work.

4 See Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature.*

Indeed, the challenge to limited conceptions of the child at the heart of *Ender's Game* highlights recent discussions about the larger literary context of which his novel is a part. In *Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children's Literature*, Marah Gubar deconstructs and disproves traditional expectations and readings of Golden Age children's literature and culture in order to complicate what have become commonplace assumptions in the field. Gubar's investigation of the Victorian Era demonstrates the complexity with which children were understood and portrayed, even—or especially—by those who considered themselves part of the "Cult of the Child." One fascinating implication of Gubar's work, furthermore, is that it highlights the degree to which children's literature scholars have maintained or perpetuated a concept of Romantic childhood despite the fact that many works and scholars of a given era challenge or reject it. As Gubar demonstrates, authors such as Robert Louis Stevenson and E. Nesbit allow for the child reader of their works to act as a sort of collaborator, one who not only passively receives but actively navigates and interprets texts. In her examination of Nesbit's work in particular, Gubar highlights the possibility that "young people can pick and choose, fusing different strands of preexisting rhetoric together in new and unexpected ways. Mutual aggression thus gives ways to a more optimistic vision of reciprocal exploitation" (124). This concept of the child collaborator indicates that at least some authors of works for children welcome children's co-participation in literary experiences. Thus, while the construction of the romantic child does persist in assigning specific expectations or demands to childhood, as well as maintaining rather than deconstructing the adult-child binary, the potential for children to take part in the creation of a text has implications for what Card suggests is a rightfully evolving attitude toward childhood.

As Gubar notes, despite the fact that Golden Age authors themselves may have understood children and adults as collaborators, contemporary children's literature scholarship has continued to struggle with a persistent insistence upon the construction of the romantic child and its implications for children more generally. Indeed, the continued centrality of the romantic child in children's literature and its criticism indicates the degree to which this privileged conceptualization influences more general attitudes toward the adult-child binary. Nonetheless, children's literature scholars have recently established more careful interrogations of this binary and the assumptions that inform it. Mavis Reimer notes, "Breaching the line between 'child' and 'adult,' as those categories currently are constructed in culture, clearly is a difficult conceptual move. Critics who work with texts

for young people can begin to do so … by refusing to use *child* and *adult* as unmarked terms in their analysis of reading positions—by making them strange" (8). This directive to trouble the terms, to "mak[e] them strange," acts as a more general indication of the direction that children's literature scholarship has recently pursued. As Card's novel—and, indeed, this critical consideration of it—demonstrates, however, "marking" such terms remains a difficult task, precisely because of the ways in which attempts to do so tend to reinforce the seeming need for clearly drawn boundaries.

Furthermore, discussions of the adult-child binary necessarily overlap with other dichotomous constructions, particularly—as Rudd notes—binaries that hold the essential and impossible child, the constructed and the constructive child, in opposition to one another. In "Theorising and Theories: How Does Children's Literature Exist?," Rudd addresses the possibility of children's literature and its criticism by "steering a course between, on the one hand, notions that there is an underlying 'essential' child whose nature and needs we can know and, on the other, the notion that the child is nothing but the product of adult discourse (as some social constructionists argue)" (16). Rudd ultimately argues that "not only are there problems with each model—an authentic, essential child and a voiceless, discursive construction—but the two notions are, in fact, impossible to keep apart (just like adult and child), the essential child being tacitly evoked by constructionists, in that a perennially voiceless child is juxtaposed to a dominating adult" (19). In asserting the impossibility of maintaining a separation between states, Rudd insists upon the possibilities of exploring rather than denying the ways in which apparently opposed states may interact. In the end, Rudd argues, "the problematic of children's literature lies in the gap between the 'constructed' and the 'constructive' child, in what I shall term a 'hybrid,' or border area" (16). This notion of the "border area" between the socially constructed and socially constructive child highlights the possibilities of acknowledging and investigating the necessary, and necessarily ambiguous, overlap between states that are commonly treated as inherently separate and distinct, a point that I argue Card's novel insists upon.

Indeed, this element of Card's work can be seen in one of the first and most explicit references to ambiguity made in the novel. Graff, the military leader who has come to recruit the six-year-old Ender, explains that Ender's status as a rare legal Third Child[5] presents specific challenges

5 According to the laws governing Ender's world, each family is legally allowed only two children; however, because of the promising but ultimately inadequate

to his parents, who both grew up in nonconformists families (Ender's father was one of nine children in a Catholic family, while his mother was Mormon). Graff says,

> "They both renounced their religions… but in fact their feelings are still ambiguous. Do you know what ambiguous means?"
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> "They feel both ways."
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> "They're ashamed of having come from noncompliant families. They conceal it.… So, you see, having a Third, even under the government's direct instructions, undoes everything they've been trying to do." (22)

That Ender not only recognizes the term "ambiguity" but can also, the narrative reveals, discern the truth in Graff's statement indicates a level of analytical skill not always associated with childhood; at the same time, there is a degree of childish naivety in his failure to recognize that Graff's honesty is a form of manipulation through which he successfully convinces Ender to leave home. Just as his earlier exchange with the nurse calls into question the boundaries between child and adult, between honesty and deception, Ender's first conversation with Graff illustrates the potential for ambiguity that defines their relationship throughout the novel. By providing and almost immediately beginning to dismantle a framework that ostensibly distinguishes between children and adults, then, Card offers greater insights into the instability of these distinctions and implicitly highlights the overlapping spaces between them.

"I've got a pretty good idea what children are": Constructing Children

Throughout *Ender's Game*, Card engages with specific assumptions about childhood—particularly ideas about size and age as indicative of strength, control, and power; children's assumed inability to recognize manipulation and manipulate others; and the perceived limitations of children's intelligence and capability—in order to draw attention to potential reconsiderations of the state as a whole. These assumptions are consistently called into question, especially those relating to intelligence: Ender, his siblings, and his classmates all possess knowledge and, more importantly, skill that

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traits demonstrated by the two older Wiggin children, Peter and Valentine, Ender's parents received permission—or, the novel implies, instructions—to conceive a third child.

denies assumptions about their inferiority or unimportance. According to Card's introduction to the 1994 edition of the novel, he portrays childhood in this manner in order to emphasize the idea that children, their ideas, and their abilities deserve respect from adults. He writes that his construction of children, which did not ring true to many adult readers, "forced the audience to experience the lives of these children from … the perspective in which their feelings and decisions are just as real and important as any adult's" (xx). In this introduction, Card also comments on the earlier short story version of *Ender's Game*, in which the title character was eleven years old (rather than six) at the outset. This change is notable: the figure of the eleven-year-old boy stands as a more direct embodiment of adolescence as the hybrid space between children and adults. By making Ender six years old rather than eleven, the novel underscores Card's efforts to emphasize the common distinctions by seeming first to uphold them. In other words, by using a figure who can *only* be understood as a child and then demonstrating the ways that he both is and is not childlike, Card can more completely interrogate assumptions about the adult-child binary.

Rather than demonstrating the complete acceptance or rejection of specific constructions, furthermore, children in *Ender's Game* present the possibility of a more complicated relationship with constructed concepts of childhood and adulthood alike, particularly as they illustrate the constructive nature of childhood. The primary child characters in the novel act as representations of Card's boundary crossings, as Ender, Violet, Peter, and Bean each simultaneously embody constructed and constructive childhood, as well as childhood and adulthood, in ways that demonstrate how these apparently opposed states frequently intersect, overlap, and depend upon each other. At the same time, the manner in which these children navigate the ambiguous spaces they encounter demonstrates the difficulty of unsettling such boundaries.

From the beginning of the novel, characters' attempts to articulate concepts of childhood frequently depend on identifying the ways in which specific children are *not* appropriately childlike. An adult notes that the students in the battle school "don't seem like little kids"; instead, he says, "They act like—history" (67).[6] Dink, one of Ender's peers, echoes this sentiment later, telling Ender, "I look in the library, I call up books on my desk.

6 What is evidently discomfiting about this notion is that we treat history as a sort of "adult territory," rarely remarking on the place of young people in the past. When he refers to "history" here, this adult doesn't mean that the children in the battle school behave as children have behaved in the past; he means that these children behave as famous historical adults have behaved.

The blurring of boundaries is especially illustrated in the child characters' capacity to embody childlike and adult qualities simultaneously.

Old ones, because they won't let us have anything new, but I've got a pretty good idea what children are, and we're not children. Children can lose sometimes, and nobody cares" (108).[7] In neither case does the character fully articulate what children should be; rather, he focuses on what these children are that they should *not* be. By going on to compare the children in the battle school to great military leaders (and losers) such as Napoleon, the first speaker suggests a dependence on concepts of childhood innocence and inexperience that can be traced back to William Blake and the Romantic child; children who can think and act like military leaders, he suggests, are too experienced and not innocent enough to be considered children at all. Dink's commentary likewise approaches a definition of childhood against its apparent opposite. Although he does not emphasize innocence, as the adults implicitly do, his view of childhood is based on his understanding that children should be free of the burden of responsibility because their actions should not be treated as having weight or worth. Moreover, Dink's attempts to define the nature of childhood demonstrate that children do not simply or passively receive adult ideas but also actively consider and construct their own understandings. Adults and children, Card suggests, share in the construction of childhood—a claim that undermines a traditional binary and challenges many conventional ideas about childhood as a constructed state.

The blurring of boundaries is especially illustrated in the child characters' capacity to embody childlike and adult qualities simultaneously, as Ender does in his conversations with the nurse and Graff. Furthermore, the qualities remain in flux throughout the novel: Ender is both able to interpret the nurse's lie and unwilling to recognize, only pages later, the manner in which Graff uses honesty as a means of manipulation. He is shrewd, observant, and at times calculating; he also cries when he misses his sister. He, most importantly, considers his place in the adult-child binary by actively reflecting on and making assumptions about the two states without necessarily aligning himself with either. His siblings Peter and Valentine likewise straddle boundaries. Peter uses deception as effi-

7 Dink's comment that the only examples he can find are in "old books" suggests a generalized understanding of literature as providing the models of childhood that he believes should have lasting value in his own world. This point is drawn out even more clearly in Peter and Valentine's use of text to construct adulthoods for themselves on the Nets. By framing these observations within contexts of stories passed down through time and text, Card draws attention to the larger question of how childhood comes to be constructed, as well as how the limits such texts place between childhood and adulthood come to be accepted as natural, right, true, and real.

ciently as any of the adults around him, but he is also marked by occasional signs of childhood: early in the novel, after beating up Ender, he sneaks into his younger brother's bedroom, crying, to apologize. More importantly, as I discuss in more detail later, Peter is driven by the possibly naive belief that he can save the world, a desire that aligns with those of the adults around him but often highlights his own youth. In contrast to Peter's striving toward adulthood, Valentine seems inclined to embrace the possibilities of childhood, or at least of being perceived as a child; she regularly refers to herself as a "kid," even when it has become clear that adults have come to depend upon her as an equal. Her desire to remain a child also implies a certain type of wisdom associated more typically with adult nostalgia for youth.

Like Ender, Bean himself acts as a personification of border areas, able both to stand in for the constructed child and frequently demonstrating the child's capacity to be constructive, able to be understood both as a young child and already an adult, fully aware of his standing and goals. Furthermore, Ender's relationship with Bean allows Card to further blur apparent boundaries between childhood and adulthood, as Ender—only a few years older than Bean—reflects upon the younger child's appearance and behaviours. Ender notices that "[Bean's] skin was still soft and translucent, the skin of a child.... He wasn't yet eight years old. It didn't matter he was brilliant and dedicated and good. He was a child. He was *young*" (220). Even in the midst of this realization, however, Ender immediately contradicts himself while considering Bean's leadership ability and battle experience: "There's no youth in that. No childhood" (220). The narrator echoes this sentiment pages later, noting that Bean "was a soldier, and if anyone had asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up, he wouldn't have known what they meant" (224). Indeed, even at eight years of age, Bean thinks like a soldier, devising strategies and intuiting the opponents' weaknesses as he becomes Ender's right-hand man. In this conflicted reflection, Ender ultimately seems to align the qualities he notes in Bean—including, notably, *goodness*—as traits associated with adulthood, not childhood, while the narrative more generally reinforces Bean's ability to simultaneously embody childhood and adulthood.

"We really are trying to be adults": The Ambiguity of Adulthood

Even as the novel highlights the manner in which children seemingly infiltrate the spaces normally associated with adulthood, it also provides ostensible support for and reminders of the lines that separate children

from adults. If we think of these constructions, and particularly the parallels between them, as an attempt to challenge or cross the borders between childhood and adulthood, then the idea that child characters can be understood as hybrid spaces also raises the question of whether we can see similar hybridity in the characterization of adults. Answering this question, however, is made more difficult by the fact that the novel frequently denies access to adult thoughts and feelings, both because the adults' voices are primarily confined to dialogue in the absence of narrative commentary and because the adults are being viewed through the eyes of children who are themselves constructing understandings of what adulthood is or means. Because *Ender's Game* allows children to consider and comment on the nature of adulthood, an act that in itself defies understandings of children as the passive recipients of adults' attitudes toward and expectations of them, much of the work of constructing adulthood is performed by the child characters themselves. To some degree, these constructions of adulthood attempt to reinforce the binary that holds adults and children as separate or opposite; this can be seen in Dink's comment that "That's right, we never cry. I never thought of that. Nobody ever cries. We really are trying to be adults" (109). Based upon a fairly straightforward distinction—children cry; adults do not—this comment reveals an acceptance or assumption of adults' strength, self-control, and remove from the emotions that dictate ostensibly childish behaviour. Ultimately, however, the novel undermines these assumptions by revealing the degree to which the adult characters are dependent, hopeful, and, most of all, potentially *good*.

Despite the fact that Card generally denies readers insights into the thoughts and feelings of adults, the actions of characters such as Graff reveal the potential for both ambiguity and hybridity as well. From the beginning, Graff's role in Ender's life is a determinedly ambiguous one: he uses friendly tones and seeming honesty to persuade Ender to enter the Battle School, then abruptly changes his tone when Ender acquiesces. While Graff's seeming inconsistencies are ultimately shown to be signs of his legitimate care and concern for Ender—demonstrated most clearly in a series of conversations he has with other adults—his actions provide clear evidence of the potential for adults to behave in ways more closely associated with children. At the same time, the novel draws attention to the ways in which dependence on the adult/child dichotomy limits the roles made available to adults in children's lives. Mazer Rackham, the now elderly hero of the last bugger war who acts as a mentor to the young soldier in his final stages of training, particularly illustrates Card's resistance to limited constructions of adulthood. By the time he meets Mazer,

Ender has become cynical, and he struggles with a complex network of ideas about children and adults, students and teachers, heroes and villains, which Mazer further exploits to ensure that the young man will behave as the adults expect him to during the final battle. Indeed, Mazer attacks Ender both mentally and physically throughout their training sessions, seemingly more schoolyard bully than caring teacher. Ultimately, the adult characters' commitment to the project of defeating the buggers, although it presents them with moral conundrums regarding the treatment of the child soldiers they help to train, indicates a theoretically childlike trust in the triumph of good over evil.

In turn, over the course of the novel Ender becomes convinced that adults should be regarded primarily as deceptive enemies, never as allies, even when Graff does try, apparently sincerely, to offer Ender emotional support: "Ender had to remind himself that Graff was only acting like a friend, that everything he did was a lie or a cheat designed to turn Ender into an efficient fighting machine" (252). More generally, Ender reflects on Graff as the model of adulthood he assumes he is expected to follow, leading to this angry revelation regarding the nature of the training he is receiving in the battle school: "And me—am I supposed to grow up like Graff? Fat and sour and unfeeling, manipulating the lives of little boys so they turn out factory perfect, generals and admirals ready to lead the fleet in defense of the homeland? You get all the pleasures of the puppeteer" (167). Even as Ender rejects the version of adulthood that he believes Graff personifies, he indicates the apparent inevitability of loss between childhood and adulthood; however, that loss is neither the finesse of his small hands nor the innocence that might be expected. Instead, the loss seems to be that of an illusion—one that Ender can hardly be assumed to have embraced too closely, as one of our first insights into the character is his recognition of adults' tendency to lie.

While adults in *Ender's Game* are, for the most part, either shadowy figures or ostensibly cold-hearted villains, Card invests characters such as Graff and Mazer Rackham with ambivalent qualities that provide insight not only into their willingness to cross moral boundaries but also to personify qualities more commonly associated with childhood than adulthood. Even Dink's apparently simple observation about crying calls the construction of adulthood into question, as many of the powerful men who observe Ender's final battle with the buggers respond to the victory with tears of joy. In other words, what initially seems to be straightforward deception on the part of the adults in fact reveals traits that align more neatly with standard expectations of children: adults in *Ender's Game* are

totally dependent upon the guidance and orders of others; they rely on someone else (in this case, a child) to protect and save them; and, most importantly, they retain the possibility of moral goodness, innocence, and trust, even as they make morally questionable decisions in their treatment of Ender and the final battle.

"If you can cheat, so can I": Crossing Moral Boundaries

Beginning with the nurse in the novel's opening pages, Card presents a near-constant stream of adult deception. The lies in question range in size and scale, but the consistent message is that adults are reliable almost exclusively in their unreliability. Ender's parents are revealed to have lied about their own religious and ethnic backgrounds. Graff, whom Ender initially perceives as honest and therefore a friend, is almost never completely honest with Ender, and the honesty he does allow is paradoxically used to manipulate or deceive the child. Petra explicitly warns Ender that "the adults are the enemy, not the other armies. They do not tell us the truth" (83). In each of these examples, Card emphasizes moral ambiguity in order to highlight and ultimately dismantle the adult-child binary: adults' ability and willingness to lie to children reveals implicit constructions of childhood, in that adults assume that children will lack the ability to perceive dishonesty, that children need to be protected from the truth, and that it is more important for adults to control children's behaviours, even through deception, than it is for children to have access to information and a potential freedom of movement. In turn, children's ability to not only recognize deception but employ it themselves demonstrates the flaws in such assumptions and in the binary distinctions as a whole. Moreover, moral ambiguity—particularly as regards the use of language and representation—proves a particularly useful lens through which to consider the deconstruction of boundaries, as efforts to interrogate seemingly straightforward questions of right and wrong also illustrate the difficulties of questioning assumptions and troubling boundaries.

In Card's novel, children lie, often just as easily as adults do, and especially Ender himself. One of Ender's first successful forays into the social challenges at the battle school involves his lying to the child who might be considered his first friend. He also actively participates in and encourages lying on behalf of those around him, especially Bonzo. At least in part as a result of the persistent figure of the romantic child, children are generally assumed not to lie, either because they are too innocent or because they lack the intelligence and rhetorical ability to do so; once they develop a tendency to lie, in turn, they are generally punished or chastised for it,

as this deception does not correspond with adult beliefs about correct childhood behaviour. Ender's ability to deceive can be understood, furthermore, as a learned behaviour, but his willingness to do so suggests a more inherent recognition of the power and usefulness of deception. He therefore lies carefully and with purpose to those around him, often with both good intentions and successful results.

Lying is not the only moral issue raised by the novel, however; as the title *Ender's Game* suggests, the consistent interest in games—both as plot devices and as metaphors for childhood—makes available a multitude of opportunities for adults and children alike to cheat. The concept of cheating, particularly in terms of changing the rules in the middle of a game, arises throughout the novel. Adults often even explicitly acknowledge this behaviour; for example, when Valentine challenges Graff during a conversation, arguing that he has deceived her, he simply says, "We changed the rules" (149). Indeed, the adults change or break all the rules when it comes to Ender's training: he is promoted ahead of schedule, given an army of "launchies" (the newest and youngest students in the Battle School) and inexperienced veterans, and forced into a fighting schedule that no other army in the school has to face. As the adults challenge Ender and the Dragon Army with unusually frequent, often unfair battles—culminating in a battle against two armies at once—Ender becomes frustrated with their refusal to fight fair. In turn, Ender does not act nobly; he does not stand as a model of correct moral action. Instead, he finds and takes opportunities to cheat, particularly by bending the rules himself. For example, in the battle against two other armies, Ender enacts the traditional victory ritual without having destroyed or disabled all of his opponents (218).

In other words, Ender cheats, too. His willingness to blur the boundaries between right and wrong is foreshadowed throughout the novel, particularly in terms of the computer game that he plays during most of his free time. The game requires Ender's avatar to face a series of challenges before meeting a giant, who presents the choice between two beverages. Ender quickly learns that no matter which he chooses, the beverage will lead to his avatar's untimely death. Ender eventually decides to ignore the Giant's command, kicking over both beverages and attacking the Giant's face while his opponent yells that he is a cheater (64). While his willingness to cheat suggests that Ender—and, by extension, children—are increasingly corruptible as they approach adulthood, Card troubles this implication by highlighting Ender's experiences of guilt and shame: "He hadn't meant to kill the Giant. This was supposed to be a game. Not a choice between his own grisly death and an even worse murder" (65). The choice Ender per-

ceives here foreshadows the novel's conclusion; it also, however, provides insight into the adults' tendency to lie and cheat when faced with what they perceive to be an equally untenable choice between the potential downfall of the human race and the deaths of an alien race who has attacked in the past but is not currently presenting an immediate danger.

Ender is not alone in his cheating, deceptive ways. Valentine and Peter likewise lie and cheat, manipulating their father into securing Net access for them and then using that access to deceive a broad readership, ultimately seeking to shape and change the nature of international politics. Despite her own reservations about this deception, Valentine, who is generally represented as the most consistently moral character in the novel, recognizes the importance of crossing moral boundaries at times. Notably, she frames her feelings on this issue in terms of games: "'We may be young, but we're not powerless. We play by their rules long enough, and it becomes our game'" (237). Peter, in turn, relishes the possibilities of crossing moral boundaries, believing that lying and cheating as a child are preferable to waiting until he is an adult to accomplish his goals. He completely rejects the limits placed on children's abilities by adults, saying that "'If I believe that [children lack abilities], if I accept that, then I've got to sit back and watch while all the opportunities vanish, and then when I'm old enough it's too late'" (131). At the same time, even Peter—who performs some of the most clearly wrong actions in the novel—demonstrates the potential for moral ambiguity. Although Peter's assertion that "'I'm going to rule, Val. I'm going to have control of something'" seems to demonstrate the despotic tendencies his siblings fear, and his other behaviours (such as skinning squirrels alive) present the chilling possibility of sociopathy, Peter's ultimate goal is to create a more united world, one that will survive and thrive rather than facing the constant threats of its own conflicts. Like the adults, then, Peter's tendency to lie and cheat cannot be divorced from the potential good that his bad actions might produce.

One consequence of the moral ambiguity portrayed throughout the novel is Ender's inability to decipher his own role in the adults' war against the alien buggers; despite his awareness of adults' lies, Ender approaches his final "exam" without correctly perceiving the situation around him:

> It *was* funny. The adults taking all this so seriously, and the children playing along, playing along, believing it too until suddenly the adults went too far, tried too hard, and the children could see through their game. Forget it, Mazer. I don't care if I pass your test, I don't care if I follow your rules. If you can

> cheat, so can I. I won't let you beat me unfairly—I'll beat you unfairly first. (293)

And Ender does believe he is cheating when he employs a seemingly suicidal tactic, which only multiplies the irony of his discovery minutes later that his actions were much less clear cut than he imagined. Rather than interpreting his "cheating" as an immoral or corrupt act, the adults around him respond by celebrating his action and praising him as a hero. In turn, Ender must re-evaluate the nature of his own action within the framework of his new understanding: what he thought of as nothing more than cheating at a game has actually had life-or-death consequences that have essentially rendered him a murderer. That the same twelve-year-old boy simultaneously stands as the hero and the villain provides perhaps the clearest illustration of collapsed distinctions in the novel, particularly because he receives both titles for the same act.

Ultimately, *Ender's Game* neither wholly condemns nor wholly celebrates the lying and cheating on anyone's part. Instead, deception is understood to be a valid option in the face of certain situations, whereas "cheating," Card seems to suggest, is little more than a reconsideration of arbitrary lines. More importantly, because it constantly asserts that a single act can be both good and bad, both heroic and villainous, the novel provides insight into larger questions of whether or not and how moral boundaries can really be determined. Although Card's project here is not to debate the potential dangers of moral relativism, his resistance to strict moral binaries functions as a lens through which to consider the challenges of troubling an adult/child binary that is based largely, if at times implicitly, on assumptions about morality. By insisting that adults and children alike can be implicated by moral ambiguities, Card more firmly cements his larger project of interrogating and, at times, dismissing assumptions about the qualities that have been recognized as distinguishing between childhood and adulthood more generally.

"You think you're grown up": Conclusions

The victory over the alien buggers is far from the end of Ender's journey: he goes on to make an important discovery about the nature of the creatures he has been raised to regard as enemies, and as he grows into young adulthood, he becomes both a powerful symbol and an active leader in his own right. However, his experiences at the end of the novel and his physical maturation more generally do not ensure, for Card, Ender's abandonment of childhood and complete acceptance of adulthood. Rather, Ender's awareness of blurred boundaries—as well as the manner in which appar-

This promise of adult responsibilities and childhood playthings existing side by side acts as one of the novel's most explicit efforts to ensure an awareness of the constructed nature of childhood and adulthood.

ently opposed states truly can be said to overlap and intersect—continues to inform his behaviour and relationships. At least in part, the border crossings between childhood and adulthood that have shaped Ender's youth are maintained in his adulthood at Valentine's insistence. After the final battle, Valentine says to her younger brother, "'You think you're grown up and tired and jaded with everything, but in your heart you're just as much a kid as I am. We can keep it a secret from everybody else. While you're governing the colony and I'm writing political philosophy, they'll never guess that in the darkness of night we sneak into each other's room and play checkers and have pillow fights'" (313). This promise of adult responsibilities and childhood playthings existing side by side acts as one of the novel's most explicit efforts to ensure an awareness of the constructed nature of childhood and adulthood, as well as the positive possibilities of the spaces between these states.

Throughout *Ender's Game*, Card examines, blurs, and even eliminates the lines that are frequently drawn between ideas of children and beliefs about adults. He does not argue that there are no differences between these states—children *are* smaller and less experienced than adults; children *do* approach some situations from different angles than adults do; children *are* vulnerable in ways that adults tend not to be—but that the differences that exist are not those often treasured or insisted upon by adults. In other words, Card works to challenge specific boundaries that have been used to delimit our understandings of childhood and literature for children. The real problem, the novel suggests, is not that such distinctions exist, but that they remain so insistent upon the concept of the romantic child, a figure that inaccurately and unjustly reflects both children and adults. The emphasis on lying and cheating provides some of the clearest evidence for this point, but the novel as a whole rejects the romantic concept of childhood as pure, innocent, and moral. In turn, the degree to which *Ender's Game* engages with moral dilemmas, particularly those relating to honesty and self-representation, allows Card to frame his consideration of the adult/child binary within larger, and no less complicated, questions of constructedness and the challenges that accompany efforts to destabilize dichotomies.

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